

3 Articles Addressing COVID in WI Prisons (early 2021)



ABOLISHmke
actions and analysis from a bad place.

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These articles were originally published at ABOLISHmke.com in February/March, 2021. The online version has embedded links to sources. We put some info from some of those sources in as footnotes for readers who cannot get online.

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to submit an article of your own!**

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"We will continue to operate the facilities in a safe and secure manner. This is a multi-pronged effort which includes following recommendations to prevent the spread of the virus and continuing with security protocols such as conducting searches in a safe manner. I trust this answers your question."

That email came on March 2, three days later, RCI was packing people on gym bleachers for two hours while going through their cells.

Under the previous DAI head, Makda Fessahaye, a memo went out to all the wardens recommending that they cease shakedowns to protect against the pandemic spreading. Despite these precautions, the DOC was hit with massive outbreaks infecting more than half³ of the population and killing an unknown number. The DOC admits to letting 25 people die of COVID, but that number is questionably low⁴ considering the high exposure rate.

Sarah Cooper is on track to get the rest of the prison population infected, and thanks to suspicious reporting and lack of accountability in the DOC, we may never know how many more will die due to her carelessness.

3 Link to Wisconsin Watch article: 'He shouldn't have had to die': COVID-19 infects half of Wisconsin inmates, five times the overall state rate

4 Link to ABOLISHmke article about the DOC's covid19 death and infection numbers not adding upwell.





Black and Pink Milwaukee did a call-in campaign to help a member keep his typewriter.

The DOC has always engaged in invasive property searches. They have a real zeal for stealing people's property, including their money². During a pandemic and extended lockdown such practices are especially cruel and unnecessary. Outside of the obvious risk of spreading the disease, the property seizures are also depriving people of items they really need.

With visitation cancelled, typewriters and tablets are needed to write letters and emails to loved ones outside. These devices also provide people with a way to pass lockdown time and get their mind off the risk of COVID exposure and sickness. Shakedowns also confiscate extra linens from people, but those linens help people who can't afford overpriced sweatshirts to keep warm in the cold winter months.

It took Sarah Cooper, head of the Division of Adult Institutions (DAI) a few days to reply to our call to action. When she did, her email was a classic bureaucratic non-response. "As the new DAI Administrator," she wrote, "I'd like to acknowledge your position on this issue. I'd also like reassure you we are committed protecting the health and safety of people in our care and our staff." [sic]

We wrote back, asking her directly if there were still shakedowns occurring and explaining that, "If you're searching people's cells during a pandemic to enforce property limits, you cannot claim a commitment to people's health and safety. You're putting enforcement of a rule about towels and sheets above people's lives." We politely asked her to, "please answer my question and address the public's concern with more than empty reassurances." Here's her response:

² Link to ABOLISHmke article on stimulus payments, in this zine.

COVID Spreader Shakedown at Racine CI

| February 26, 2021 | ABOLISHmke.com

Staff at the prison in Racine (RCI) are forcing captives to congregate in the gym, and then going cell to cell spreading covid19 by tossing everyone's property. They do not change gloves between cells, and at least one of the tossed units has gone on isolation quarantine.



Warden Paul Kemper standing outside his prison.

Coronavirus is still present in Racine, and at RCI. The pandemic hasn't magically stopped spreading via surfaces, so guards rifling through everything in an infected but asymptomatic person's cell will carry virus particles to every cell they shake down subsequently. Read the details about the shakedowns in the message we got from someone held at RCI at the end of this post.

The DOC's terrible policies allowed major outbreaks, infecting more than half of the people they hold captive. Resuming property shakedowns and congregating people in gyms is a good way to ensure that the remainder also get infected, or that people who recovered get re-infected.

In the past, the DOC has put facilities on lockdown and done unit-wide cell searches after a significant security incident or the discovery of contraband. This shakedown does not appear to be inspired by such an event, but is just being done to bring people into conformity with new property limit rules. That means, they are risking everyone's lives to enforce petty DOC rules about how many towels or blankets captives are allowed. Our contact said:

"we are being put at serious risk over NON serious issues. having too much allowed property is not a threat to the safety or security of the prison. in all the years I've been incarcerated I've never heard of a major unit shakedown to ensure inmates didn't have too much allowed property, especially at a time like this."

We've also heard that a memo regarding these property limits went out at the prison in Oshkosh (OSCI). This memo likely went to all facilities across the system, so we're afraid that similar shakedowns will occur in these other facilities, if they aren't already.

An admin at the Division of Adult Institutions (DAI) said the shakedown violates a memo they sent about safe covid practices, so at least one Warden, Paul Kemper at RCI, has his staff disregarding his bosses' safe practice rules. Unfortunately, the reformers at the top of the DOC will not require wardens to comply with their directives unless they receive written complaints.

Kevin Carr likes to position himself as a reformer, but he's clearly not pro-active and needs to be continually pushed into doing the right thing.

Please join us by writing complaints. Email DOC officials and demanding they **STOP THE SHAKEDOWNS**.

Email the RCI warden, DAI head, and DOC secretary:

Paul.Kemper@wisconsin.gov
Sarah.Cooper@wisconsin.gov
Kevin.Carr@wisconsin.gov

Make your message personal, if you have time. Here is a suggested script:

The DOC must stop all unnecessary cell searches, immediately.

A shakedown risks spreading covid19 by forcing people to move around, break social distance, and most importantly by surface spread through guards rifling through their property.

STOP THE SHAKEDOWNS!



The fence and control tower outside of RCI

Sarah Cooper's COVID Spreader Shakedowns

| March 10, 2021 | ABOLISHmke.com

Two weeks ago AbolishMKE broke a story about cell searches at the Racine prison (RCI) preceding new COVID cases and a quarantine. We sent the story to reporters (only Wisconsin Examiner seems to have picked it up) and asked readers to contact DOC officials demanding an end to cell searches, or "shakedowns."



Sarah Cooper, head of the Division of Adult Institutions *DAI boss Sarah Cooper*

(DAI) responded instead with more and worse shakedowns. According to a message from someone held at RCI, staff pulled everyone out of their cells at 9:30pm on March 5 for a surprise shakedown. Captives were brought to the gym and forced to sit together on the bleachers "thigh to thigh" for two hours while guards went through the cell block touching everyone's property.

Contacts at other facilities have confirmed that cell searches and stricter enforcement of property limitations are happening across the Wisconsin prison system. Someone held at the Waupun prison (WCI) wrote that their cells often get searched while they are out taking showers or making phone calls.

In other facilities, contacts have reported the DOC increasing seizures of typewriters, tablets, radios, and other property. The DOC gets away with stealing this stuff by making rules outlawing people from keeping things that have been damaged or that were gifts from other captives on their way to release.

Is there any better explanation for this series of actions taken by the DOC and the IRS than that they simply want prisoners to have less than nothing? From the complicated filing process, to the fact that the DOC from the beginning insisted that their staff were “not allowed” to help prisoners file, to the miscommunications about where the completed 1040s were to be sent, and now this—debit cards. A final “fuck you” to the people in Wisconsin prisons.

The cruelty is the point, pure and simple.

The IRS has since released a memo¹ and sent information to the prison officials, but the damage is done. Many people have already sent their debit cards out to loved ones or trusted advocates. The DOC will get their money from the prisoners, regardless of policy or practices put in place from outside.



1 link to - caresactprisoncase.org/update-to-prison-officials-from-the-irs/

A message from an RCI captive:

“...i just wanted to update u all on whats been going on lately. they’ve been doing major unit shakedowns, making everyone on the unit go to the gym. then going through the cells. I believe they did three units so far. one of the units they searched has gone back on quarantine, the entire unit. this is Milwaukee unit and its an isolation quarantine not a regular quarantine. this in my view is no coincidence since staff rarely if ever change their gloves when doing cell to cell searches. they look through peoples garbage, dirty clothes etc and just go on to the next cell with the same gloves. handling the next persons stuff with the same filthy gloves.

i personally witnessed staff doing this during a recent electronics sweep (looking for bogus TV’s radios fans etc that aren’t on an inmates property list and were left to them by an inmate being released) of the entire unit, and once again a extra linen sweep. in that case looking for extra state issue clothing and bed sheets and towels. Future health and lives are being put at risk over this as the general prison population has not been vaccinated for covid, only those 65 and over and many staff are refusing to get vaccinated out of some conspiratorial belief the vaccine will give them covid, cause them to die, become paralyzed, it may have a toxin in it or some other drug the drug companies want to secretly test on people, etc., ad nauseum.

i guess these impending searches are being impelled by a desire to see that all of an inmates personal property fits in three cardboard boxes, (not including electronics items and consumable commissary) and all legal papers fit in one cardboard box. the boxes they are referring make less space than we are actually allowed by policy, but that’s a side issue. The point is that this is not something that is serious enough to jeopardize peoples lives and health over, especially when there is no limit to how many times someone can get covid, and when they presently have a more dangerous and contagious covid variant identified in Wisconsin. People should know about what is going on. we are being put at serious risk over NON serious issues. having too much allowed property is not a threat to the safety or security of the prison. in all the years I’ve been incarcerated I’ve never heard of a major unit shakedown to ensure inmates didn’t have too much allowed property, especially at a time like this. if inmates possess everything the doc allows them to have, they can still be over allowable space limitations.”

Stimulus Obstruction in Wisconsin Prisons

| March 02, 2021 | ABOLISHmke.com

"The IRS sent me and others a debit card instead of a check for our EIP 2 (\$600) and the prison won't process them or place the funds on our accounts. They require us to send the cards out and find another way to get the funds off them."

-Prisoner in the Wisconsin DOC



For anyone who is unaware, prisoners are not allowed to have credit/debit cards in their possession, so this is a particularly cruel act on the part of the IRS, who in collaboration with the DOC has made the stimulus program a nightmare for prisoners.

For some background, initially the IRS declared that prisoners were ineligible to receive the stimulus. They were still never eligible for the very first stimulus of \$1200 that many people received back in April, 2020. When the government rolled out a second stimulus of \$1200 in September 2020, Scholl v. Mnuchin, Case No. 20-cv-05309-PJH resulted in a win for prisoners—Phyllis J. Hamilton, United States District Judge from the 9th Circuit made clear that prisoners are not exempt from receiving this stimulus.

Three groups of people leapt into action:

- Prisoners reached out to all their lifelines in hopes of getting their hands on this money.
- Advocates mailed 1040s & instructions behind the walls en masse and filed online for as many people as possible.
- And the DOC and IRS worked tirelessly to ensure they would steal as much of this money as possible.

This whole process has been a slow and inconsistent one at best. Some people filed as early as possible (end of September, 2020) and have still yet to receive even their first payment. While others who filed around that time received their stimulus money within a few weeks. In the beginning of January, the IRS said that anyone who had filed but not received the stimulus payment needed to re-

file, causing even more confusion. Some people "received" the payment, but had most if not all of the money taken, so they were unaware that they had technically been paid out. Without a reliable source to check the status of a prisoner's stimulus payment, many people have filed again—hoping they were just overlooked and that this will be the one that works.

This check was supposed to go entirely to the prisoners, unless they had back child support. The DOC was able to take advantage of a loophole and recoup back fees and other fines or charges levied against prisoners. I know two prisoners who had nearly half of their first stimulus taken, another only ended up receiving a dollar. These are all people who don't have children. In light of this, adjustments to the language of the bill have been made and the \$600 stimulus will not be taken from people, as explained by a case clerk:

Specifically, Section 272(d)(1) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act provides that the IRS may not apply reductions or offsets under 31 U.S.C. Sections 3716 and 37201A or 26 U.S.C. § 6402, including for overdue state or federal taxes or child support. Additionally, Section 272(d)(2) of the Consolidated Appropriations Act provides that the second round of stimulus checks "shall not be transferable or assignable, at law or in equity, and no applicable payment shall be subject to execution, levy, attachment, garnishment, or other legal process, or the operation of any bankruptcy or insolvency law." This means that this round of stimulus checks may not be garnished to cover overdue debts by federal or state prisons for any eligible individuals.

After closing these loopholes, the IRS—who didn't want prisoners to get this money from the very beginning—and the DOC seemed to team up and come up with a new scam. Debit Cards.

For many, the \$600 stimulus payment was sent in the form of a debit card, one that they are not allowed to have in their possession. They are presented with the card and asked who they would like the card to be sent to.

What happens next?

The person who receives the card will go online to transfer the funds from the card to the prisoner's account. This will cost a fee to the service transferring the funds and then since this is no longer "stimulus" money, or it is indistinguishable from any other deposit to a prisoner's account, the DOC can take their cut—upwards of 35%.